

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington D.C. 20505

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The Honorable Jesse Helms
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Helms:

This is in response to your 29 August 1986 letter, which was received on 4 September, regarding the 1983 shootdown of KAL-007. The shootdown of KAL-007 occurred because Soviet air defense personnel consciously chose to fire at the aircraft. The immediate causes of this tragic event were failures on the part of Soviet forces to identify the airliner early in its penetration, when they would have had sufficient time to use nonlethal means to force it down. But the overlying cause of the event was a Soviet policy that valued the sanctity of Soviet airspace over the safety of international air travel. Certainly this value has no place in a civilized world.

The current debate on what the Soviets thought about their target is misplaced. Although it is clear that the Soviets had initially misidentified this airliner, we will never know precisely what the Soviet pilot and his controller were actually thinking as the interceptor closed in on its target that tragic morning. What is important to keep clearly in mind is that the tragedy directly resulted from the Soviets' "shoot first, ask questions later" policy.

Moreover, past experience would suggest that even had the Soviets properly identified the aircraft, the outcome may well have been the same. In April 1978, other Soviet authorities ordered another interceptor pilot to destroy an earlier lost KAL airliner over the Kola Peninsula. In that case, perhaps less well known because of its lower loss of life, Soviet authorities knew precisely what they were